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## **Gaming for Affect: Museum Online Games and the Embrace of Empathy**

### **Abstract**

This article explores how museum online games encourage and activate affective encounters in players. Video game theory has much to say about affect and empathy as ways into the narrative worlds constructed in games, and this literature is revisited here with respect to museums' games in particular. The article questions the extent to which 'gaming for affect' is a defensible museological and curatorial strategy, and at what point it tips into simple 'emotioneering'. It presents two case studies wherein appeals to empathy can be scrutinized: *Ngā Mōrehu – The Survivors* from Te Papa Museum in Wellington, New Zealand, and *Over The Top* from the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa, Canada. Both games encourage players to adopt a first person perspective within environments characterized by challenge and despair. Their choice as case studies here is deliberate and strategic; they represent two distinct approaches to game design and raise questions about the technical, educational, and curatorial parameters of gaming for affect. What kinds of narrative worlds should museums seek to construct? What kinds of experiences do visitors expect – and crave – within these encounters? Finally, what is the relationship between the games, users' experiences of them, and the larger narratives museums construct across multiple sites and media?

**Keywords:** affective design, emotioneering, video games in museums, museums and digital media, empathy

The increased investment by museums in online games is symptomatic of a growing trend toward gamification of the cultural realm and, more crucially, of peoples anticipation of and expectations for the museum encounter, whether virtually or on-site (Kidd 2014). Games are, as Jonathan Corliss has asserted, 'increasingly a feature of our culture' (2011: 9); they blur work and play (Yee 2006), and gaming and sense-making.<sup>1</sup> Their very appearance on a museum's website signals a desire to curate a suite of offerings and activities that entice within what has been termed the 'engagement economy' (Palmer et al. 2012) and extend into other environments. They are also shared via social networks, collated on blogs, or even installed within 'offline' museum exhibitions and gallery spaces where their curatorial context varies considerably.

Gamification refers to the growing trend for activities and environments not traditionally understood as video games to take on their mechanics, structures and reward systems.<sup>2</sup> Such activity recognizes, as Judd Antin (2012) has argued, that 'pecuniary (e.g. money, gifts) and instrumental (e.g. information seeking) motivations are not the only ones worth talking about'. Recently, more cultural institutions and practitioners have turned to games-makers for inspiration in how to engage, and maintain, communities of interest.<sup>3</sup> Online games are perhaps the most straightforward and visible example of this ludic turn in museums practice.

The analysis of online museum games is particularly relevant now given the widespread uptake of casual and social gaming. Games have become 'native' across a range of platforms and hardwares and garnered popularity beyond the traditional video game audience of 10-30-year-old-men.<sup>4</sup> Jane McGonigal (2011) noted that '[c]ollectively, the planet [was] spending 3 billion hours a week gaming', only one year after Tom Chatfield had predicted that casual games would soon become 'universal'

(2010: xiii). Such ‘casual gaming’ is a category within which most museum online games most comfortably sit; their aesthetic, usability and the commitment required by users being reminiscent of the broader suite of casual games on offer in 2015.<sup>5</sup>

This article explores how museum online games encourage and activate affective encounters in players. It engages with Margaret Wetherell’s proposition that it is important to assess how considered and deliberate any attempt to determine affective practice is, and not only to accept it at face value. Wetherell asserts that:

Analyses of affective practice [should] take as their subject how these practices are situated and connected, whether that articulation and intermeshing is careful, repetitive and predictable or contingently thrown together in the moment with what else is to hand.

(2012: 13)

Given the growing expansion of museological practice into the online environment, my concern in this article is to critically account for how the affect of empathy has emerged as a particular subset of affective experience within museum online games.

In developing my problematic I have found Shamay-Twoory et al.’s (2009) conception of ‘affective empathy’ exceptionally helpful, where ‘affective empathy’ is understood as the capacity to *respond with appropriate emotion* to another’s mental state. This is distinct from ‘cognitive empathy’; i.e. the capacity to think oneself into and *understand* that mental state. The latter would constitute a ‘more advanced cognitive perspective-taking system’ (617–18). Shamay-Twoory et al. contend that affective empathy is a ‘basic emotional contagion system’ and Lamm et al. (2007) assert that it can manifest both as empathic concern and compassion typical of altruistic motivations,

and more troublingly perhaps as distress and anxiety characteristic of egoistic motivations. These distinctions are noteworthy and, especially given the challenging narrative worlds being created in museum games, significant. It is my contention that where museums might be aiming for *cognitive empathy* and increased understanding in their games because of their learning mandates and (formal or informal) public value ethos, it is in fact *affective empathy* (along both trajectories outlined above) that is the more likely outcome. I will begin by surveying research related to affective experience in video gaming more broadly, before presenting two case studies where appeals to empathic engagement can be scrutinized in relation to the museum's context.

Within video gaming, the emergent category of 'museum games' presents a range of possible engagements.<sup>6</sup> In addition to those I will discuss here, examples include *High Tea* (Wellcome Trust, London, UK), *Dressed to Kill* (Tower of London, UK), *Great Fire of London* (Museum of London, UK), *The Beatle's Game* (National Museums Liverpool, UK), *Before the Boycott: Riding the Bus* (National Civil Rights Museum, Memphis, US), *Gold Rush* (National Museum of Australia, Canberra), *Virtual Knee Surgery* (Center of Science and Industry, Columbus, US).<sup>7</sup> In each game, the narrative contained within the 'game-world' might be easily understood as a single unit of analysis, with a beginning, middle and end. While it is not my aim here to configure a typology of museum games, it is important to note that there are distinctions between roleplaying games, simulations, creative play, and puzzles.<sup>8</sup> Their play is always and inevitably inflected with affective experience of some sort or another whether excitement, curiosity, frustration, humor, empathy, or at times, indifference. Given the affective engagement of gaming as point of departure, I will examine museum games that work to invoke empathy, in particular, in the context of difficult and sensitive subject matters.<sup>9</sup> Assuming a character in the form of 'first-person' subjectivity is of

course commonplace in video games, and there has been some attempt within gaming literatures to explore what the impacts of that might be. One concept that emerges as particularly salient in that discussion is Daniel M. Johnson and Janet Wiles's idea of 'affective design', which is configured to captivate the player's attention. In order to achieve this, video games, then, constitute what they identify as 'a genre of software in which the user's affective experience is paramount' (2003: 1332).

### **Video Gaming and Affective Design**

Affective design describes the construction of game worlds that elicit particular emotional responses (Norman 1986; Picard 1997). Game designer David Freeman asserts that actions within a video game can have real life consequences for a player in the form of adding 'depth' and facilitating behavioural development:

Willingness to take responsibility or even sacrifice for another character gives the player depth, just as taking responsibility for someone else gives a person depth in real life. It's [...] a 'first-person deepening technique'.

(2004: 4)

Such 'first-person deepening techniques' are understood by Freeman to give players more emotional maturity by the end of a game than they might have had prior to game-play: 'It's similar to how, in real life, we grow emotionally by confronting difficult choices' (2004: 6). Although Freeman presents little in the way of evidence in his discussion, his assertion is not unfounded. The literature on gaming and affect shows that games have the potential to alter emotional states both in the short and long term, whether positively or negatively (Rajava et al. 2004).



Research into gaming along this trajectory is symptomatic of a broader swell of interest in affect across the academy. It is reflected in efforts, according to Margaret Wetherell, to 'bring the dramatic and the everyday back into social analysis' (2012: 2). This has impacted on research carried out within the social sciences, cultural studies, and social psychology where an 'affective turn' has been noted. Such studies have enabled the exploration of what Wetherell describes as 'phenomena that can be read simultaneously as somatic, neural, subjective, historical, social and personal' (2012: 11). Positive affective experiences are considered by many to be the life-blood of museum encounters, yet there has been little consideration of what they might mean in the online spaces museums increasingly inhabit (Kidd 2014).<sup>10</sup>

Ongoing investigations into gaming and affect have tended to explore games' impact on aggression and social behaviours, seeking to understand how that impact might be correlated.<sup>11</sup> The results of such exploration remain inconclusive, although as Greitemeyer and Mügge note, it is clear that 'cognition, arousal and affect' are indeed somehow 'connected' to one another in the moments of play (2014: 579). Of interest to this discussion however is the concurrent investigation that has taken place into the impact of some video games on *pro*-social behaviours such as empathy (Belman and Flanagan 2010; Bogost 2011). Empathy has been defined as when a person 'feels her/himself into the consciousness of another person' (Wispé 1987); in this case, into the mind of the protagonist in the game. Empathy, then, is understood as an other-oriented feeling that can lead to a number of positive outcomes such as a motivation to respond with care, or with action (see Haugh and Merry 2001); of course, with the proviso that not all empathetic encounters are in themselves positive ones.

In order to understand the uses of empathy as an affect within museum and heritage contexts, it is useful to turn to recent pedagogical research where empathy has

been found to be key to learning potentials. According to a review of the neuroscientific literature by Fesbach and Fesbach (2009), empathy can increase social understanding, lessen social conflict, limit aggression, increase compassion and caring, lessen prejudice, increase emotional competence, and motivate pro-social behavior, that is, moral behaviours and altruism. These findings can be extended to the world of video gaming to demonstrate that games designed to heighten emotions can also lead to increased cognitive development (Adolphs & Damasio 2009: 27). The fact that emotions impact cognition is significant to the work of museum educators, interpreters and curators.

James Ash (2013) has written at length about the possibilities afforded by affect for the video game player, and for games makers also. His studies, which look at the relationship between affect, cognition and commodification in relation to video games (using examples such as the *Call of Duty* franchise, ongoing since 2003), have highlighted the possibility of building environments designed with the express intention of manipulating emotion and heightening affect. The capacity of video games to affectively engage players is the most important tool game designers have at their disposal if they are interested in such outcomes as ‘captivation’, continued play, and eventually further purchase:

[G]ames such as *Call of Duty 4* actively sensitize users to open their bodies to a variety of affective states in order to become skilled at the game [...]. [This] points to a politics of captivation in which the sensual and perceptual relations in the body are organized and commodified by these games in order to create attentive subjects.

(Ash 2013: 28)



According to Ash, the intensity of encounters one might have in video games is structured into the very maps and rules that players use to navigate game-play (2013: 32). As examples of affective design, such structures attempt to 'generate particular kinds of affects or responses through the material and aesthetic design of products in order to capture and hold users' attention' (Ash 2012: 3–4); to make them 'attentive subjects'. This can be achieved at a micro-level, although it is never a guarantee that any such attempt will be successful. As Ash asserts, 'designers can never be sure about how the game will be taken up and played by the public' (2012: 10). Far from universal, affect is both dynamic and mobile in Margaret Wetherell's sense, as well as subjective and unpredictable (2012: 12).

To Ash, affective design aims to ensure what he terms 'attention-capture' for reasons that might be deemed cynical (2013: 21). Such intent is echoed in the reflections of Freeman on the processes of 'emotioneering' in design in which he has been complicit as a games designer himself. Numerous techniques are used in order to help stir emotion during game-play with a variety of objectives: to create a buzz around a product, to attract the attention of the press, to encourage a wider demographic profile of players, or to gain competitive advantage for example (Freeman 2004). These are ambitions that may well be mirrored by museums in their take-up of online games, but there is a necessary manipulation in such attempts to evoke and immerse that should be scrutinized in such contexts, where games are supposedly designed with learning in mind, and where some concept of cultural value often supersedes any commercial imperative.

There has been some attempt to unpack the introduction of such games within the museums context. Mia Ridge (2011) outlines no fewer than eight objectives for the creation of online games in heritage contexts:

1. To increase brand awareness for the museum.
2. To entice non-visitors to come to the museum
3. To engage players with museum themes or collections.
4. To encourage visitors to the museum to familiarize themselves with the institution and exhibitions.
5. To deepen enjoyment at the museum, especially for the novice.
6. To deepen observation of the collections and exhibition subject matter.
7. To change visitor behavior in some way.
8. To crowdsource museum needs, such as collections identification.

At the heart of these objectives is learning, variously defined: learning about and through museum collections; learning about historical events and themes; learning about the institution; or even learning to modify behaviours in the world. As previously noted, engaging affect is one route to cognition, and a particularly powerful one, constituting what Wetherell calls 'embodied meaning-making' (2012: 4). Yet it has been also famously asserted that all educational games are 'crap' (Brenda Laurel in Fortugno and Zimmerman 2005). 'Serious games' as they have been termed by Ian Bogost (2011), have faced something of an image problem. As Mortara et al. note (2014), since 2000 more attention has been given to ensuring graphical elements are attractive to increasingly sophisticated end-users; they must look like games, not 'just educational tools with a weak game dressing' (see also Gee 2007). Serious games, though, can create worlds within which exciting learning opportunities can be presented, and potential new audience relationships forged. Museum online games are created not only for entertainment and educative purposes, but also with a view to providing motivation for

further exploration of a museum's resources, and thereby encompass an important profile-raising function. Principally available free online, they are oriented to both informal learning situations as well as structured classroom environments. Aimed for the most part at younger users,<sup>12</sup> their growth in numbers reveals a perhaps questionable assumption that younger more technologically savvy learners do not respond well to other current manifestations of the online museum such as searchable collections and databases.

In the research that underpins this article, a significant cluster of games were found to be emotioneering, that is, using affective design in order to secure embodied meaning-making. Opportunities to engage empathetically were especially noteworthy for their frequency (comprising a third of the sample of 30) and their intensity. Mortara et al. note the possibilities of empathic affect in the conclusion to their 2014 study that references cultural heritage contexts and serious games explicitly:

We believe that [serious games] for cultural heritage are particularly suited with respect to the *affective domain*. Empathy with a game character and plot may be very helpful for understanding historical events, different cultures, other people's feelings, problems, and behaviours, on the one hand, and the beauty and value of nature, architecture, art and heritage, on the other one.

(2014: 324)

Yet the authors fall short of offering an appraisal of how such investigation might translate into game-play, or, more crucially perhaps, with regard to ethical considerations. The following two case studies offer a critique of how 'emotioneering' is

realised in two examples wherein appeals to empathy can be scrutinized: *Ngā Mōrehu* from the Te Papa Museum, in Wellington, New Zealand, and *Over The Top* from the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. Both games encourage players to adopt a first-person perspective within environments that are characterized by challenge and despair, but do so differently. My choice of these games in this article is strategic in order to demonstrate two very different approaches to gaming for affect.

### **Affective Design in *Ngā Mōrehu* – *The Survivors***

Te Papa (The Museum of New Zealand / Te Papa Tongarewa) is New Zealand's national museum and gallery, situated in Wellington on the North Island. Opened in 1998, its mandate is unique as a bicultural institution acknowledging both Māori and settler cultures, one that has emerged from a long history of national conflict. The museum has community at its core, seeking wherever possible to represent the diversity of New Zealand's people both in its exhibitions and management structures. The Museum is jointly led by a CEO and Kaihautū (Māori leader) (Te Papa 2015).

*Ngā Mōrehu* is an online game which can be found on the Te Papa Museum website in their 'Interact' section alongside two other 'games' (Te Papa n.d.). These other games, 'Who Am I?' and 'Guess the Decade!', might best be categorized as puzzles, but *Ngā Mōrehu* seeks to do something rather different in providing an interactive first person perspective narrative for players to immerse themselves in. The title, *Ngā Mōrehu*, translated from Māori to English means 'the survivors', which is the subtitle of the game. From the start it asks players to assume the role of a named Māori child in the early twentieth century and to make a number of decisions that direct the course of that child's life as he/she grows into adulthood. The text addresses the player as follows:

Welcome to *Ngā Mōrehu*. Life in early twentieth-century New Zealand can be tough and not always fair – particularly if you’re Māori. Can you overcome the hurdles in front of you? Have you got what it takes to survive? Then let’s go on a journey.

*Ngā Mōrehu (The Survivors)*, Te Papa Museum, Wellington

The consequences of those decisions are complex, and reveal much about the manifold injustices and prejudices faced by the Māori people and the difficult legacies they have left behind. The player will have to decide whether to stay with family or leave to chase a more prosperous future, what kind of an education should be striven for, whether and who to marry, and how to cope with the outbreak of war. As such, players are encouraged to move between a number of different affective states, from sadness, guilt and frustration to relief and pride in their eventual survival against the odds. There are 12 ‘scenes’ for the player to move through, each presenting an obstacle of sorts that must be overcome.

[Figure 1] Screen still from *Ngā Mōrehu (The Survivors)* (n.d.). Photo: courtesy of the Te Papa Museum, Wellington NZ

There are a number of examples here that help to demonstrate affective design in action. From the start screen the game environment encourages empathetic engagement through a number of signals, such as the assumption of a named character complete with facial expressions and bodily poses, then later, through the many details of the protagonist’s family life that are given. Throughout the game, the player is encouraged

to think through the character they choose, and to wish the best of all possibilities for them. When that character faces prejudice due to her/his Māori roots and the decisions they have made, the player is explicitly implicated. There is thus a direct attempt to encourage other-oriented feeling through the game-play, its structures and narrative devices.

However, that wish to do best by the character chosen is challenged again and again when one encounters another aspect of affective design at play in *Ngā Mōrehu* (*The Survivors*) – the counter-strike. At various points of the game it transpires that the many injustices of society are insurmountable. Because my character is Māori, her choices are in fact limited. Any sense of agency engendered in the option to choose becomes ultimately illusory. The resulting frustration only serves to deepen that sense of other-orientation and as a result encourages understanding and even potentially attitudinal change. This other-orientation might also extend to Maori player, who, given their temporal distance from the character in the game, might experience a diachronic sense of othering also.

As a player, I opt for my character to be called by her traditional Maori name ‘Matariki’ in school. I make a simple selection, but the game bites back, the text inscribing the player’s identity within fixed social roles.

You were born on the dawn of the Māori New Year. Nanny Ira named you after the star cluster Matariki. Miss Marple can’t pronounce your name properly. She calls you Martha anyway.

*Ngā Mōrehu* (The Survivors), Te Papa Museum, Wellington

My teacher cannot or will not pronounce my name and so calls me by my English name



‘Martha’ regardless of my wishes. In a similar vein, the male character receives the strap because speaking Maori in the school is ‘forbidden’.

[Figure 2] Screen still from *Ngā Mōrehu (The Survivors)* (n.d.), Photo: courtesy of Te Papa Museum, Wellington.

Here, and in other moments of the game-play, it can be seen how affective design is being used with the express intention of determining the emotions and heightening the feelings of a player in character. As the game’s introductory text has warned, ‘Life in early twentieth-century New Zealand can be tough, and not always fair – especially if you’re Māori. Have you got what it takes to survive?’ My character will experience prejudice whichever path I decide to send her down. Despite my efforts to support the best of all possibilities, I cannot save her from hardship.

The player’s cues above impel the anticipated cognitive goal, which is to learn more about Māori communities and their heritage by feeling yourself into ‘their’ consciousness. Given the game’s layering, it is possible to conclude that affective design is used here with sensitivity and some skill and that it is a coherent contribution to the organizing logics and ambitions of the Te Papa Museum itself to ‘take you inside the New Zealand experience’ in a way that is ‘bicultural, scholarly, innovative and fun’ (Te Papa 2015). The insider perspective of an Indigenous experience is here usefully uncomfortable and alienating in its affects.

### **Emotioneering in *Over the Top*, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa**

The Canadian War Museum (CWM) in Ottawa, Ontario, is the country’s national museum of military history. It first opened in its present location in 2005 with the

mandate to emphasize ‘the human experience of war’ (CWM 2015). Inviting players to reenact moments of military history is the goal of *Over the Top*, the next museum video game I will analyze. *Over The Top* is situated within the education pages of the museum’s website, in the Games and Activities section (CWM n.d.) It is described as an ‘interactive adventure’ that enables you to ‘go into history itself!’ and ‘experience life in the trenches’ as a Canadian soldier in 1916 (CWM n.d.) From the opening screen of *Over the Top* it is apparent that the player is to be implicated in the game-play when they are promptly asked to give details about themselves that in turn structure the game: first name, last name, place of residence, and a friend’s name. They are then encouraged to begin their ‘adventure’ in the trenches of World War One: ‘pick up your rifle, put on your helmet and get ready’ [CWM n.d.]. There are many routes through the game’s narrative, which is interspersed with opportunities to make decisions about how to proceed.

[Figure 3] Screen still of *Over the Top* (n.d.). Photo: courtesy of the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

Once entered, the details from the initial screen make frequent re-appearances in the text in order to encourage immersion in the story. Your friend accompanies you throughout your trench experience and is eventually killed in action, you are called by your first name and asked to perform a number of duties by your superiors. It is not a faceless stranger who dons a gas mask, throws grenades, and shoots to kill the enemy, but oneself in character, walking in the leaden boots of those soldiers who went before. Again, affective design is mobilized in an attempt to elicit a subjective and emotive relationship between the player and the story worlds created in a way that might

increase cognitive and affective buy-in to the story. The following quote from the game's narrative demonstrates how language is employed to dramatically draw the player in:

The earth heaves as each explosion sends mountains of dirt flying in all directions. Barely do you have time to utter a faint prayer then a shell lands right on your position. You never knew what hit you, nor did anyone else.

(CWM n.d.)

The language used in the text is clearly emotive, attempting to arouse anxiety, shock and horror in the player. The text preceding Figure 4 says 'The bombs begin to fall around you, sending mounds of dirt over your quivering body' and then presents you with three options. "Get up and run for the rear lines", "Get up and head back to your dugout" and "Stay where you are"" (CWM n.d.). It is also filled with familiar semiotic referents to that war including the mud, the lice, the barbedwire, the 'Jerries' (a slang word for German soldiers during the War). Yet, the decisions that are made by the player impact only to a limited degree on the game's progression. As with *Ngā Mōrehu*, any decisions present the player with the mere illusion of agency, the path being in actual fact entirely pre-scripted. This kind of 'explicit interactivity', as described by Eric Zimmerman (2004), is common in video games where choices and procedures are pre-designed. It is a programmed interactivity, and not the only kind that is in the toolbox of most games designers. Zimmerman notes different subsets of interactivity that are available to games makers; such pre-programmed interactivity is only one of those options (2004).

[Figure 4] Still from *Over the Top* (n.d.). Photo: courtesy of the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

In the case of *Over the Top*, these pre-programed decisions invariably move players ever closer to their character's own eventual - and inevitable - demise. Unlike most video games, even those about war that offer some hope of survival or 'the win', in *Over The Top* the protagonist dies in all iterations of the game-play experienced. Having lost their friend, been rewarded for killing German soldiers, survived a gas attack and been taken as a prisoner of war, a player's eventual fate is pre-sealed. The affect, ultimately, is one of powerlessness. In a last nod to design with the explicit intent to affect, the closing screen of the game features a telegram to the player's parents informing them that their child has been killed in action. The text insets the player's identity in the death notice. Mine reads:

To Mr and Mrs Kidd,

Deeply regret to inform you that private Jenny Kidd was officially reported killed in action November 9. Officer in Charge, Record Office.

CWM n.d.

[Figure 5] *Over the Top* (n.d.). Photo: courtesy of the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

I want to suggest that this moment in the game is a demonstration of the fine line between 'affective design' and a less considered form of 'emotioneering' (Freeman 2004). Both museum online games try to encourage a kind of instrumental weakness; the player's position is characterized by a futility that is configured to circumscribe the

heritage in question. But there is something chilling in the exegesis of the affective engagement in *Over The Top*.

Dying is of course a plausible conclusion to the gameplay given the loss of Canadian life in that war, and victoriousness would hardly be a more reasonable outcome. Nevertheless, the telegram is a stark and surprising conveyer of the news of a player's own demise. Whereas any approach that offered a more vivid and visceral account might be considered inappropriate, it remains important to acknowledge what has happened in that moment of death, otherwise, as writer and games developer Joe Bernardi (2013) asserts, it remains the case that 'games use death's thematic and emotional teeth without properly reckoning with its realities'. *Over the Top* does not encourage any reflection on the part of the player on the questions that are raised by their own death which is, unlike in many other video games, permanent. The fact that one's character is, to a limited degree, one's own creation – one which has been inhabited and who is now dead – means the death experience has increased significance for players (Hoffman 2010: 113). The question of what it is to face one's death has been pinpointed as 'the single most controversial subject in virtual worlds' (Bartle 2003: 415). The implications of such a permanent death should be approached as an ethical consideration. In most games death has a functional purpose, to indicate temporary failure to achieve a goal, or in Joe Bernardi's sense, 'play / die / restart' (2013). This cycle is a part of the symbolism and the language of video games that gamers are familiar with. But death in *Over The Top* is fundamentally different; the goal of survival and the win will never be achieved. Ludologically speaking, ultimate mortality gives the game meaning, but it is out of step with the experience of death within other game environments.

Regarding the question of fatality in gaming platforms, Joe Bernardi has

proposed that '[v]ideo games have gradually turned death, the most (*only?*) influential and thought-provoking aspect of human existence, into a nearly-unexamined cliché' and goes on to assert that although in games death is everywhere, '*dying* is strangely absent [...]. From a gameplay standpoint, the hero is alive, then a switch is flipped, and then [s]he is dead' (2013, italics in original). As death remains unexamined in a game such as *Over The Top*, the charge of 'emotioneering' seems more apt than an acknowledgement of considered 'affective design'.

According to Thomas Nys, a consideration of 'ethics in the domain of virtual actions' includes engaging with a number of questions (2010: 80). What, if anything, is wrong with killing virtual people (as a player does in *Over The Top*)? Might it be precisely the thrill of such virtual actions – the fact that they transgress the rules and laws of reality – that makes a game so appealing in the first instance? (Nys 2010: 81). The parameters for online killing are clearly different with regard to the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise than for *Over The Top* that has its basis in real-world historical events, but nevertheless it still needs scrutinising. *Over The Top* usefully raises deep questions about mortality, existence, the capacity to be human, and humane, but also suggests how important it is for museums to be attuned to debates about virtual ethics.

### **Curating Museum Online Games**

As content curation becomes not only a material and artefactual concern, but a digital one also, questions are raised about the responsibilities of museum 'makers' in the online context. Museums have their codes of ethics, and the professional bodies that represent them do too, but rarely are those codes nuanced enough in their treatment of digital communications to prompt institutions to consider their practice within these emergent formats.<sup>13</sup> If there is to be a move from *courting* affective empathy to *facilitating*



cognitive empathy – making the latter easier or more likely – then museum codes of ethics need to be expanded to include digital media.

Game designers can only partly direct the experiential elements of a game, they can design the rules of play, dictate the formal structure, but they cannot control how a game will be inhabited and ‘felt’ (Salen and Zimmerman 2004). Exploring how a game’s formal system translates into an experiential one for players can help museums understand how and in what ways the game contributes to, or conflicts with, a museum’s stated goals. Such exploratory action research has a pedigree within museum visitor studies, but less so in the online context. Where both formative and summative evaluation of learning programmes have become strategic commitments in museum institutions, online studies are more likely to be focused on measures of usability and analytics.

With regard to questions of affect and the curatorial there are other unexplored tensions. Online games enter into an interpretive relationship with the other spaces of the institution – the physical site (if there is one), the rest of the website, and the social networks museums increasingly occupy.<sup>14</sup> Very little is known about how those working on game design and construction (both within the museum and externally as designers) reflect on or conceive of the games as history ‘makers’ that contribute to centuries-in-the-making museum narratives, and are thereby implicated in their processes and politics of representation. What interpretations inform the gameworlds they construct? It is un-controversial to note in 2015 that interpretations are incomplete and partial, and museums increasingly employ strategies that allow for the presentation of multiple – and even conflicting – perspectives. How this might be achieved within museum games is relatively unexplored. Of course the games’ affective dimensions are not static, and might alter over time in ways that are not currently anticipated. The cases explored here

raise questions about what is genuinely achievable by museums within the casual gaming format, and whether the designation 'game' for much of this activity is ultimately the most useful one. The unabashedly commercial imperative for affective design is now clear within the wider gaming sector, but the value of the 'attentive subject' for museum online games still needs unpacking.

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<sup>1</sup> See also Shaw (2010) and Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. (2013).

<sup>2</sup> See Rayner (2011), Deterding et al. (2011), Werbach and Hunter (2012), Jagoda (2013) and Silva et al. (2013).

<sup>3</sup> See for example Simon (2013) and the Victoria and Albert Museum's appointment of their first 'game designer in residence' (Clark 2013).

<sup>4</sup> For more on gaming demographics see Chatfield (2010), Bogost (2011), McGonigal (2011) and Charles (2012).

<sup>5</sup> Well known examples of 'casual' games include *Angry Birds* (2009), *Words with Friends* (2009), *Draw Something* (2012) and *Candy Crush Saga* (2012). Many of them are marked by the facilitation of social play (e.g. *Draw Something*) rather than by individual play.

<sup>6</sup> The topic of museum online games is gaining traction within the museological discourse. See e.g. Kelly (2014), Schaller (2014), Mortara et al. (2013), Birchell and

Henson (2012), Henson and Birchell (2011), Ridge (2011, 2012), and Falk Anderson et al. (2009). A number of relevant contributions can be found at Museum-iD (2015).

<sup>7</sup> The technical, educational and curatorial aspects of these games were explored in Kidd's (2014) analysis of their framing, content, educative function, utilization of collections materials, level of interaction, and game mechanics.

<sup>8</sup> Kidd (2014) includes a chapter-length study of 30 online museum games.

<sup>9</sup> For more on how difficult and sensitive heritages might be understood, see Kidd (2011, 2013) and Kidd et al. (2014).

<sup>10</sup> For example, Rebecca Atkinson (2014) of the UK Museums Association has noted that 'the number of attractions offering digital communications other than a website increased from 67% in 2012 to 77% in 2013'.

<sup>11</sup> See Ferguson (2007), Mitchell and Savill-Smith (2004) and Greitemeyer and Mügge (2014).

<sup>12</sup> A younger target audience is indicated by locating games within the 'kids' or 'education' pages of museum websites, or by presenting them with additional teaching resources.

<sup>13</sup> See American Alliance of Museums (2000), Museums Association (UK) (2008) and The International Council of Museums (2013).

<sup>14</sup> How online museum games themselves might be preserved and maintained over time, and whether and how they should be archived, raise further curatorial questions.